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## Comedy and Humour, Stereotypes and the Italian Migrant in Mangiamele's *Ninety Nine Per Cent*

Raffaele Lampugnani

(Monash University)

### ABSTRACT

Giorgio Mangiamele is regarded as the most significant first generation Italo-Australian filmmaker of the post-war period. Yet, in spite of his “pioneering efforts” and his attempts to be accepted into Australian mainstream cinema by adopting English dialogue and Australian characters in many of his films, he remained to an extent marginalised as an “ethnic” filmmaker, achieving recognition and some government financial support only towards the end of his life.

In this study, I will explore an avenue of criticism suggested, in particular, by film critic Quentin Turnour (2001). Giorgio Mangiamele, the critic argues, “needs to be remembered [...] as maybe one of our first art filmmakers”.

The focus of the study will be *Ninety Nine Per Cent*, Mangiamele's only film regarded as comic and the only one that was acquired by ABC Television, and supposedly screened only once (never screened in Victoria). A reading of the filmic text reveals one of the reasons for the lack of success and moderate acceptance: behind its comic veneer the film is quite sad and gloomy. It will be argued that Giorgio Mangiamele has sought to express his feelings and the social and historical conditions of his time using a combination of stereotypical imagery and the uniquely Italian (Sicilian) kind of humour theorised by philosopher and playwright Luigi Pirandello in his essay “L'umorismo”. Pirandello (Mangiamele was well acquainted with the Italian canon) argues that humour occurs when spectators, after the initial comical impression, perceive the “sentiment of the opposite”. As spectators, we too laugh at Mangiamele's characters and their funny antics, but we quickly change our mood as we understand their motivations, their social malaise, alienation and existential despair. In short, we are able to perceive the Italian migrant experience more vividly when we become aware of the “sentimento del contrario”.

Giorgio Mangiamiele is widely regarded by scholars researching the Italian diaspora as the most significant first-generation Italo-Australian filmmaker, one whose work and influence is slowly being acknowledged both by historians and film critics in Australia and Italy. As John Conomos has affirmed, Mangiamiele's films of the fifties and sixties are fundamental to "[a]nyone engaged in reading Australian cinema in terms of its multiple representations of the non-Anglo-Celtic migrant since the 1920s" (Conomos 1990:12). But, as I have argued elsewhere (Lampugnani 2002), in spite of Giorgio Mangiamiele's pioneering efforts and his attempts to gain acceptance in Australian mainstream cinema by adopting English dialogues, and by choosing Australian characters for many of his films, despite his close collaboration with other Australian filmmakers, he has remained marginalised and labelled as an *ethnic* director who focussed mainly on migrant themes.

Mangiamiele is now relatively well known among independent filmmakers,<sup>1</sup> albeit not in the wider community, and critics acquainted with his work appear divided as to the most fitting critical approach. Whilst some critics have termed his work "a bit old fashioned",<sup>2</sup> others praise his achievements, including his success at Cannes in the early 60s and his likely influence on other filmmakers.<sup>3</sup>

An alternative avenue of criticism has been suggested by film critic Quentin Turnour who argues strongly that Mangiamiele's "poetics should not be aesthetically hamstrung by a flow of cultural associations now inevitable to any suggestion of the presence of a Cinema of Migrant Experience" (Turnour 2005). Mangiamiele, the critic argues, "needs to be remembered [...] as maybe one of our first art filmmakers". A divergent view is offered by Nigel Buesst in a recent and most moving homage paid to Mangiamiele contained in his documentary *Carlton + Godard = Cinema* (2003). Buesst highlights yet again the filmmaker's pioneering merit, but he also, and perhaps unwittingly, restricts critical appreciation of his work by labelling him as "Neorealist". In addition, by replacing the original modern jazz soundtrack of his embedded excerpts with more traditional folkloric accordion tunes, or the pop song of the Sixties "Tintarella di Luna", he again markedly reinforces the ethnic migrant theme in the early movies.

Whilst both critical positions with regards to the artistic and (neo-)realist contents of the early works are pertinent, Mangiamiele's filmic language also needs to be examined in greater depth taking into account stereotyped imagery and the structuring of situations in the light of the Italian literary canon with which the filmmaker was familiar. Indeed, it is in the tradition established by fellow Sicilian philosopher and playwright Luigi Pirandello that comic situations in *Ninety Nine Per Cent* are carefully designed to provoke short responses of laughter followed by more intense reflection on the migrant character's plight and the alienating forces in society. In this study, I argue that in the film *Ninety Nine Per Cent* Mangiamiele has appropriated the dominant imagery of his host society, by stereotyping the typical migrant in order to expose social prejudices that were prevalent



in the assimilationist period while, at the same time, eliciting our empathy with characters caught in typical Pirandellian grotesque humour.

### *Ninety Nine Per Cent*

- Geez, she's a film star! Are you sure she would marry me?
- Ninety per cent! ... Ninety nine per cent sure!

The film *Ninety Nine Per Cent* is the story of a widower with a young son who deludes himself into believing he can marry a beautiful, younger blond woman. The main character is Pino, a migrant who earns his living by selling goods "as he would in the streets of Naples" to gullible fellow countrymen in espresso bars and in the streets of Carlton in the immediate post-war period. Incompetent at housework, he is unable to care adequately for his son Peter and, at the suggestion of a neighbour, seeks an arranged marriage through a matrimonial agency. When he finally meets his would-be wife, he is rejected by her, ostensibly on the grounds of physical appearance.



Because of its "absurd, comic possibilities", the film was judged by critic Quentin Turnour as "Giorgio's best" and "a surprise because its flippancy and absurdity contrast with the moral seriousness of everything else in Giorgio's career" (Turnour 2005). Let us consider Turnour's analysis of the comic element in the film:

Apart from the traditions of Italian stage farce it owes as much to silent comedy as the other films owe to the silent cinema's melodramatists. Jacques Tati comes to mind – although Giorgio derives his comic effects from montage rather than extravagant and comically assembled mise en scène. Clarke and Giorgio have Tati's sense of human speech as comic sound effect rather than text. ... Again, the mode is parable: a spivvy Italian father tries to please his Anglicized young son by integrating into the mainstream through an arranged marriage. The film's comic pleasures address the divergent cosmopolitanism of Carlton in the '60s rather than the exclusive picaresque of the Italian community there (Turnour 2005).

It is, in fact, difficult to agree entirely with Turnour's view. The film *Ninety Nine Per Cent* is superficially funny whilst, at the same time, unfolding a remarkably sad situation. Also, although we can agree with Turnour that some situations are extreme and perhaps paradoxical, there is an underlying element of realism which makes the migrant experience depicted more than just absurd: it is absurdly stereotypical as I discuss below.

In spite of the ABC's acquisition of *Ninety Nine Per Cent*, the film was a huge professional disappointment for the director as it was never shown on television in Melbourne and only briefly elsewhere. This lack of appreciation and artistic success was interpreted by the director as due to envious boycott on the part of foreign interests, as he affirmed in an interview:

In the case of *Ninety Nine Per Cent* there was someone who wanted to distribute it. He wanted to buy it and distribute it. [...] American interests stopped him. The film was bought by Channel 2 of the ABC and it was screened in some Australian cities, but not in Melbourne. In conclusion, small things, childish ones [...] they are the same emotions, the same passions that children have (Lampugnani 2002).

Mangiamele's words expressed justifiable disappointment, yet it is doubtful a foreign interest would have actively intervened to boycott a short film by an emerging young director in the early Sixties. Perhaps the measure of the film's lack of success and the lack of appreciation that it aroused can partly be attributed to the content, the visual impact and the disturbing implicit social criticism contained in the film itself.

According to Mangiamele, the story grew spontaneously out of real life events narrated to him by acquaintances:

You only make comedy because the story says 'this is comedy'. It comes from the story ... yes it's organic. Joe was another migrant I knew in Carlton who used to tell these stories. The film just came out of the stories. He had a wonderful face and so did his son, but his English was no good, so he did it in Italian ... Bob (Clarke) did the voice later (Turnour 2005).

But Pino did not just have a "wonderful face"; he is stereotypically Southern Italian: short, stout, dark-skinned, with dark oily hair and a round face, a moustache and a sly look on his face. The wily element in his character is reinforced by devious traits in his behaviour when dealing with others, selling worthless fabric marked "wuoll", cheap watches and clocks, and cigarette lighters that do not work to naïve compatriots, jumping the queue at his son's school and lying about his wealth in order to be accepted by his hoped for bride. Though illiterate, he keeps up appearances pretending to have left his glasses at home.



With all his physical and character flaws Pino is both typical and stereotypical of post-war migration.

### **Government and community attitudes to Southern Italians in the 1950s**

Statistics indicate that most post-war Italian migrants to Australia originated from Southern Italy and the island of Sicily, and most had no qualifications (Bertelli 1987:42, 47). But, whilst Pino's background corresponds largely to that of the typical Italian migrant of the period, it is most unlikely that anyone in his condition would earn a living selling goods of doubtful quality and counterfeit fabric in the streets and coffee shops of inner Melbourne. The majority of migrants became low-skilled factory workers and were often referred to as 'factory fodder' (Pannucci 1992:56).



Thus, Pino in this regard is not a typical Italian migrant but a stereotype of the Italian migrant as perceived in the wider community, condensing the prejudices of both the host Australian society and the Italian community where a north-south bias existed about "white Northerners and the black Southerners" (Alcorso 1992:11).

A correct appreciation of Mangiamele's stereotyping of the main character is crucial to the interpretation of the film. The film articulates visually a widespread prejudicial attitude towards Southern Italians during the assimilationist years. Such stereotypes were not confined to the first decades of the century: a survey of documents at the National Archives of Australia shows that such prejudices existed through the post-war period and beyond.

The 1949 Australian Immigration Policy established the assimilationist policy, and articulated social attitudes which were to last until the introduction of multiculturalism:

The newcomer shall merge into the community, accept its allegiance and its way of life, speak its language and conform to its education standards – in other words, he (sic) shall be assimilated.<sup>4</sup>

The post-war immigration policy was conceived in the light of recent wartime experiences, the perceived immediate need to "populate or perish" and the inability of Britain to supply enough migrants to satisfy Australia's needs, but also reflected the mind-set of the 1901 Immigration Restriction Act (White Australia Policy). In theory, the Immigration Policy professed openness to cultural changes and religious and cultural tolerance, insisting "on the integrity of the community and the reality of its democratic character and [...] the merger into the community of elements from other countries who are willing to accept its way of life and pay allegiance to its authority" (ibid.). In practice, perceived racial features, colour and physiognomy were of the utmost importance to policy makers and administrators, and the public in general. In a memorandum dated 25<sup>th</sup> January 1950, the Secretary of the Department of Immigration, T. H. E. Heyes, raised with the Secretary of Foreign Affairs the possibility of "limiting the migration to Australia of Southern Italians on the grounds of their illiteracy and undesirable living habits" (NAA1531/1). This followed a draft resolution prepared in November 1949 by the Advisory Council to the Department of Immigration which advised that:

the average Southern Italian [...] only by a miracle can rise above the status of a labourer. His hygienic habits are anything but satisfactory [...] generally he (sic) is not as good a type [as Northerners] either physically or mentally. He is more prone to retain his Italian outlook and characteristics and to resist assimilation to a greater extent than the Northern Italian".<sup>5</sup>

Desmond O'Connor, in his study of the post-war settlement of Italians, has provided evidence that shows how the Australian government in the 1950s attempted to exclude Southern Italians on the basis of such negative perceptions (O'Connor 2004:68-72). Archival sources indicate that, having reached a kind of collective construct of an inferior type of Southern Italian that was undesirable as immigrant, the Australian Government and individual immigration officials took steps to curb migration from the South of Italy.

It is difficult to assess with certainty how much the racial appearance and living standards actually motivated these discriminatory attitudes, but it is important for the purpose of our analysis to note that such prejudicial representations were not merely



constructed and applied by Australian officials, but were also accepted in the general community, including the Northern Italian community living in Australia. Commonwealth Migration officer, A. H. Priest, wrote in a memorandum to the Secretary dated 6<sup>th</sup> February 1950 that there was “frequently criticism in the Australian community of the Italian migrant [...] due to the factors of illiteracy and relatively poor standards of living”. He quoted a complaint received from a Mr Simeoni and other “prominent Italians” about the “undesirable” type of Italian arriving since the war as quite inferior to the “Northern industrial and intellectual Italian”.

### **Stereotyping the Italian migrant in *Ninety Nine Percent***

Pino, the protagonist of the film, is Mangiamiele's visual expression of the undesirable Southern Italian migrant stereotype, but he is also by extension an image of the Southern European migrant in a general sense, and an image of their plight in an assimilationist society that rejected those elements it deemed different. As Paul Martin Lester affirms:

The combination of stereotypes with prejudice and discrimination is lethal [...] Stereotyping converts real persons into artificial persons. In our stereotypical acts, we ignore the individuality of people and treat them as proxies for some we have decided they should represent. We stop treating them as real persons in their own right and treat them instead as artificial persons, which means as extensions of a category we have constructed (Lester 1996:10).

Pino's negative portrayal is not limited to his physiognomy and undesirable work ethics: his habits and hygiene are less than desirable. When Pino takes off his coat we realize he is only wearing a shirt collar and front and sense the singlet underneath has not been washed for a long time. Cobwebs cover the windows, junk and rubbish is piled up in his cottage home, carpets are old and torn and furniture minimal and in bad taste. Dirty dishes and food leftovers piled up on the table are just pushed aside to make room for wads of money he is barely able to count using his fingers as a kind of primitive abacus. Taps are dripping and broken chair legs are held together with rough bandages. According to David Schneider, body shape and features are closely connected to specific traits assigned in the process of stereotyping: endomorphs (fat people) are “seen mostly as [...] sloppy, uncompetitive, lazy, unhealthy, unattractive, and unadventurous [...] male endomorphs [are] seen as especially sloppy and dirty” (Schneider 2004:502). Similarly, Pino, who is called “fat wog” by the drunkard in both the opening and the closing scenes of the film, is criticized by the headmaster for not sending his son to school clean and neat, but untidy and with torn trousers. Pino is incapable of any meaningful house maintenance and is criticised by his son Peter for his uncleanness; the only way to clean up his home for his future bride is to dump and burn everything in the back yard. The protagonist is observed by his neighbour trying to do some household



chores with little success, and is consequently advised that he should find a wife “from [his] own country”. Obviously, the Australian neighbour believes he is unsuitable for a local bride or will be unsuccessful in meeting one. This attitude, once again, reflects closely the attitude of the wider society and of government, exposing the contradictions of an assimilationist policy that precludes the possibility of assimilation of those perceived as different. According to Ellie Vasta, in the Sixties, single Italian migrant men were considered in danger of becoming “an unruly force without the tempering influence of women” (Vasta 1992:144). A fact which prompted Immigration Minister A. R. Downer to give “absolute priority [...] to nominations on behalf of parents, wives, dependent children, sisters, fiancées and other single women”, after the minister had become alarmed in 1958 at the rate of intermarriage and the possibility of “a shortage of women in Australia”.<sup>6</sup>



But Mangiamele's filmic language not only depicts the stereotyping of Italian migrants; for good measure it also includes Anglo-Australians stereotypes prevalent in the Italian community, in order to expose further the irreconcilable chasm in a society that having made the decision to promote immigration created conditions that were not conducive to the integration of host and immigrant cultures and communities. The Anglo-Australians depicted are tall and lean, speak slowly and coldly in clichés or what Turnour terms “somnambulant, monosyllabic exchanges” (Turnour 2004). The marriage-agency owner is materialistic and callously pragmatic, listing women by their physical attributes as if they were objects and responding to tragic events involving a customer by sending out a reminder of an unpaid account. The young men in the espresso bar become agitated when they hear the word “work”, and the lanky drunkard of the opening and closing scenes hurls abuse, suggesting the “wog” should go back home to his country. The final image of the intoxicated Australian surrounded by migrant children who ridicule him is a brilliant example of Mangiamele's appropriation of the dominant stereotyping and prejudicial language that is able to give visibility to the condition of the Italian diaspora: in his squalid isolation and alienation the caricature of the self-assured Australian intoxicated by his feeling of superiority is as alienated and anguished as the pathetic figure of Pino rejected for his appearance by the beautiful and haughty Northern would-be bride Anastasia.



### Humour and the “sentiment of the opposite” in *Ninety Nine Per Cent*

Given the rather unpleasant plot and quite sad ending, one might question the validity of the claim that *Ninety Nine Per Cent* is a comic or humorous film. What are the elements that could be considered funny and what makes the spectators laugh?

It can be argued that Giorgio Mangiamele sought to express his feelings within the social and historical conditions of his time as, in Turnour's words, “a poet of cinema's power to universalize feelings”, using the humour theorized by Luigi Pirandello in his



famous essay "L'umorismo", and by integrating it into his strong construct of stereotypes that juxtaposes the comic elements to the tragic condition and circumstances in which the protagonists are positioned.

Umberto Eco in his essay "Pirandello *Ridens*" sets out to define Humour in contrast to the Comic. Quoting the German philosophers Kant and Hegel, Eco suggests that:

laughter arises when we arrive at an absurd situation that defies our initial expectations. But in order to laugh at this 'error', it is necessary that we not be involved in it and that we feel a sense of superiority at the error of someone else [...]. For Hegel, the essential element of the Comic is that whoever laughs feels so sure of his own rightness as to be able to experience a sense of superiority when observing the contradictions in others (Eco 1978:83).

By way of example, Eco mentions the typical case of the *miles gloriosus* strutting about and slipping on a banana peel: we feel this is comical because we expected a different kind of behaviour of him, and, furthermore, "we have not slipped, we are delighted and diabolically surprised, and therefore we laugh" (ibid.).

In *Ninety Nine Per Cent*, there are numerous instances of comic situations whereby spectators are surprised by the absurd, unexpected predicaments the characters find themselves in, and laugh because they are able to feel the sense of detachment mentioned by Eco. Pino does not literally slip on a banana peel, but is caught up in all sorts of hilarious, unexpected comic situations. In the first espresso bar scene, for example, Pino's attempted swindle at the expense of the taller, naïve Northern Italian backfires when his supposedly inflammable fabric catches fire; his composure and pompous air of importance, when he declares himself to the school's janitor to be an important, busy businessman, contrasts vividly with the bickering he stirs up among the Italians waiting for their turn, and with the phlegmatic composure of teachers in conference inside the headmaster's office. Comical are also his naïve attempts at concealing his ripped trousers, the way he spits the tip of a cigar into someone else's eye to give himself an air of importance, and the image of a black cat being thrown out the window onto a pile of junk during the protagonists' spring-cleaning of the cottage. The conditions mentioned by Eco are there: we can continue to feel detached and superior, we as spectators would not be caught in a situation where our ripped pants were exposed to public scrutiny, we would not make the mistake of throwing a cat out of the window with all the other junk, and so on.



But these minor incidents, though comical, are not critical to the humorous discourse that is central to the story of a rather unattractive, uneducated and uncouth older Southern Italian migrant man who allows himself to be persuaded by the owner of the marriage agency that he will be able to obtain a younger, very attractive blond wife who could also serve as mother for his orphaned son. The key to understanding the kind of Humour at work in this film is again given to us by Umberto Eco. We do not only laugh

when we see a character fall into a comical predicament; we also laugh when we are able to anticipate this happening, when we can predict this happening:

we have Humour [...] when, given a situation that is not yet comic (the *miles gloriosus* is still strutting about and has not slipped yet), we anticipate the Comic that is potentially in it, in order to warn ourselves that our system of expectations can be defied at every step of the way (Eco 1978:84).

When Pino is first approached by his neighbour who suggests he should find himself a wife, he responds candidly: "But how? I have no sex appeal, and I'm shy with girls". Pino soon manages to convince himself he will be successful with the help of a matrimonial agency, and from this moment on we, as spectators, are able to predict that he will be sorely disappointed, falling flat on his face, because we have already categorised him as an unattractive type with little chance of success. We see him dressed up in a double-breasted suit, white shirt and tie, a hat, a flower in his lapel and showy handkerchief in his coat pocket, strutting along the streets of Carlton with an umbrella as a walking stick and a cigar in his hand and the sound of tambourines in the background. Spectators sense the incongruity of this situation and predict an unpleasant comic ending to this pretentious stance. The migrant *miles gloriosus* has not slipped on his banana peel yet but we can sense clearly that he will. Mangiamele plays with spectators' expectations by having an anti-climax half way through when a reasonably attractive girl waves and smiles at him from a distance. Pino is tricked into believing that he has somehow become attractive and waves and smiles back only to realise the woman was greeting someone standing behind him.



But why would Mangiamele expect spectators to find the situation incongruous? Why should they assume that Pino will be rejected even before the camera has the opportunity to show the first meeting between him and Miss Anastasia Koskas, his would-be bride? The reaction is partly due to the marked contrast in physical appearance and educational background between the protagonist and the object of his desire. His would-be bride, Anastasia (like a mythic unattainable Russian princess as her name suggests) is characterised mainly through metonymic glimpses of fairness and femininity: her very blonde wavy hair, the impeccably manicured hands and fingernails, her perfectly white skin, perfect white teeth, the nape of her neck and ankles. Manifestly, there is something absurd about the mismatch being operated, but spectators' reactions and expectations are also dictated by socio-cultural cognitive perceptions operating in stereotyping processes, so that the final rejection of the young woman, openly laughing and ridiculing the protagonist's appearance with uncontrollable bouts of laughter, comes as no surprise to viewers.

These biased perceptions would have been sharper in the assimilationist environment of the Sixties. As suggested by Jacques-Philippe Leyens, "[t]he function of *social differentiation* aims at clarifying and accentuating the differences among groups in order to establish a positive distinction in favour of the ingroup" (Leyens 1994:70). But the perception of incongruity is not limited to the "ingroup": spectators in the Italo-Australian community would have been similarly affected. As proposed in Craig

McGarty et al., "stereotypes are shared tools, not just private pictures [...] stereotypes form because people belong to groups, and they allow them to act proficiently as group members" (McGarty 2002:183). Both Anglo-Australian and Italo-Australian spectators at the time would have perceived the prospective union of such ethnically and physically disparate types represented in the film as grotesquely comic. Indeed, in the early years of Italian migration, intermarriage was not an attractive or an expected option in the Italo-Australian community in the post-war period<sup>7</sup> and the popularity and frequent practice of proxy marriages and the widespread application of the family reunion schemes and family sponsorships promoted by the government bear this out.

What Mangiamele really intended to do in *Ninety Nine Per Cent* was to construct a grotesquely humorous situation that would trigger a Pirandellian "sentiment of the opposite", after the initial comical impression, to draw attention to the ostracised position of the typical migrant.

As mentioned above, Luigi Pirandello gave his definition of Humour, which in his view is quite different from the concept of the Comic, in his seminal essay "L'umorismo" where he gives the example of a grotesque image to make his point:

I see an old lady, whose hair is dyed, and completely smeared with some kind of horrible ointment; she is all made-up in a clumsy and awkward fashion and is all dolled-up like a young girl. I begin to laugh. I *perceive* that she is *the opposite* of what a respectable old lady should be. Now I could stop here at this initial and superficial comic reaction: the comic consists precisely of this *perception of the opposite*. But if, at this point, reflection interferes in me to suggest that perhaps this old lady finds no pleasure in dressing up like an exotic parrot, and that perhaps she is distressed by it and does it only because she pitifully deceives herself into believing that, by making herself up like that and by concealing her wrinkles and gray hair, she may be able to hold the love of her much younger husband [...] then I can no longer laugh at her as I did at first [...] from the beginning *perception of the opposite*, reflection has made me shift to a *feeling* [sentiment] *of the opposite* (Pirandello 1974:113).

The fundamental difference between the Comic and the Humorous arises from, then, according to Pirandello, and I would say in Mangiamele's view as well, an act of reflection and from an understanding of the human condition which is at the basis of a given incongruous situation. After the initial perception of incongruity, reflection takes over and tries to understand the reasons why the character is in that situation. As Eco explains, "the character is no longer separate from me; in fact, I try to get inside the character. In so doing, I lose my own sense of superiority because I think I could be she [sic]. My laughter is mixed with pity" (Eco 1978:83). The critic synthesises the difference that Pirandello underlines:

*The Comic:* Something contrary to the natural order of things is happening, and I laugh because it does not concern me (detachment) and because it allows me to feel superior [...].

*Humour* [...] Something comic is happening, but I give up my own detachment and superiority as I try to understand the feeling of the person who appears comical (Eco 1978:85).

As spectators, we too laugh at Mangiamele's character and his funny antics, but we quickly change our mood as we understand his motivations, his social malaise, alienation and existential despair. In short, we are able to perceive the Italian migrant experience more vividly when we have time to reflect and we become aware of the "sentimento del contrario". Pino is a widower migrant who tries his best to bring up his son in spite of his educational handicaps: he is human and shares the same sentiments, needs and desires as all others in society. He mourns the loss of his wife and has a little private shrine to honour her memory, yet he seeks social acceptance and longs to have a partner like others in the community. As Mangiamele stated in an interview:



Sono tremendi i difetti, sono difetti dell'uomo ignorante, analfabeta. Conosce appena appena quattro parole d'inglese ... e riesce a vivere in un modo o nell'altro come sarebbe vissuto a Napoli. È umano però lui ha cercato di farsi una moglie per il bambino per il proprio figlio perché quello rimpiange la madre eccetera, è un fatto umano lui fa un sacco di cose per incontrare questa donna qua, la sposa, ... la tua nuova madre sta per venire e poi la cosa fallisce e lui è demoralizzato, vinto.<sup>8</sup>

(The defects of this man are enormous: he is ignorant, illiterate. He knows barely a few words in English ... he managed to make a living ... But he is human, he tried to get himself a wife for his son's sake, because his son misses his mother, etc. it is a very human desire to try and find a wife and he does his best ... then the whole thing collapses and he is vanquished, demoralized [translation mine].)

Following the rejection, the protagonist Pino and his son Peter walk the streets of Carlton in anguished silence and stop before a church where a couple of happy Italians have just got married. Amid the good wishes of all, family, friends and relatives, the newlyweds kiss and embrace; confetti flies in the air and lands on Pino's grief-stricken face mingling with his tears. Father and son walk to a nearby park and sit in silence surrounded by groups of cheerful children playing and running around, each closed in his own personal unhappiness and isolation. An image composed with pebbles on the ground symbolizes the alienation and solitude they feel in society even when surrounded by others.



By the end of the film Mangiamele has restored balance in the life of his protagonists who find comfort in each other's company and affection and family values. He has been very successful in using Pirandellian humour connected with perceived stereotypes, which are not merely "shared beliefs about person attributes" but "often behaviours of a group of people" (Leyens 1994:3). He has exposed the contradictions of a society that, while preaching integration of "New Australian" and assimilationist ideals,

has yet acted to counter any such possibility, creating feelings of alienation in its migrant community. Umberto Eco tells us that one can smile when one is able to connect with the situation depicted: "if you so choose, but the reason you smile would also suffice to make you cry" because humour "reveals to us the mechanism of life" (Eco 1978:89).

As Manuela Gieri explains in her study on *Contemporary Italian Filmmaking*, "[Pirandellian] humour differs from comedy and tragedy, and is characterised by the juxtaposition of both. As such, humour is profoundly transgressive [...] and it is so because it operates in the interstices between narrative and discursive strategies" (Gieri 1995:121). It is this exploitation of Pirandellian humour in the film that has allowed Mangiamiele an artistic means of redefining filmic expression, of disconcerting spectators, and representing the migrant experience. In the film *Ninety Nine Per Cent* Mangiamiele has gone far beyond the creation of a visual expressive language able to represent itself on the big screen (Tuccio 2005). He has created an effective filmic language through the appropriation of the dominant prejudicial assimilationist discourse of the time and the construct of Pirandellian humorist situations that are socially disturbing. The strength of this filmic language and the seriousness of its subject matter may in the end account for the film's negative reception in the period in which it was released.



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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> An award is given in Mangiamele's memory by The Producers' and Directors' Guild of Victoria; several testimonies are available online on Australian and Italian sites.

<sup>2</sup> "Interview with Nigel Buesst" (*Senses of the Cinema* July 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Silvana Tuccio (along with others) considers that Mangiamele's visual and oneiric imagery has influenced Peter Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975). Critic Quentin Turnour considers that "naïve art film school in Australian cinema – in particular in the features of Rolf de Heer and Paul Cox – could be applied retrospectively to Mangiamele" and suggests that "Mangiamele's lonely Carlton lanes dovetail effectively into the alienating Australian suburbs of Patrick White's *Riders in the Chariot* or Robin Boyd's *Australian Ugliness*" (Turnour 2005).

<sup>4</sup> National Archives of Australia (hereafter NAA), ACT Regional Office, Series A1838/1 Item 1531/1 P-I.

<sup>5</sup> "Entry to Australia of Southern Italians", Draft for the Advisory Council on Immigration, November 1949.

<sup>6</sup> "More Australian Girls Marry Europeans", Press Statement by the Hon A. R. Downer, 20<sup>th</sup> June 1958.

<sup>7</sup> See page 143 of Gianfranco Cresciani's *The Italians in Australia* (Cresciani 2003) and cfr. Penny and Khoo (*Intermarriage: A Study of Migration and Integration*. Carlton South: Bureau of Immigration Research, 1996) whose statistics show an increasing intermarriage rate, and Lampugnani and Trafaglia (in Nina Bivona ed., *Italian Towards 2000: The Role of Italian Studies in Australian Universities, Prospects for the Future*. Melbourne: Victoria University of Technology, 1994).

<sup>8</sup> Interview tape-recorded on Friday, 25 October 1996. Raffaele Lampugnani's archive.